"Maybe I Can Have It Both Ways": Fascism, Deconstruction, and the Politics of the Personal in Academic Writing

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Abstract

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The purpose of this investigation is twofold. On the one hand, this essay will argue that French deconstruction’s ideological focus on effacing the personal from all academic projects was a key link in the French avant-garde’s relationship with fascism. Then, by referring to the works of Alice Kaplan, a post-holocaust deconstructionist scholar, this project evaluates her efforts to introduce the personal and political perspectives into academic discourse in a way that remains ideologically consistent with her post-structuralist training. In three chapters this project untangles Kaplan’s relationships with three fascist characters whom she folds into her academic writing. Central among these characters is the literary scholar Paul de Man, Kaplan’s teacher, whose influence haunts all of her academic work. The goal of this project is to emphasize the centrality of the authorial subject in post-war efforts to rescue French avant-garde thought from fascism, and to investigate a mode of scholarship that might help these second-generation scholars resolve the tensions in academia left by fascist intellectuals.

Ultimately this project hopes to alleviate some of the stigma of inserting, intentionally or otherwise, personal bias into academic projects. By examining Kaplan’s work, I hope to demonstrate the impossibility of objective research, while also showing that the personal and political are inseparable from even the most self-aware academic writing. Kaplan’s inability to fully evaluate de Man on an ethical scale reveals the shortcomings of a deconstruction methodology, namely that while it is useful for analyzing rhetoric, it is unable to account for the ethical implications of historical actions. In turn, this project attempts to elucidate the benefits we gain from studying the overlooked space between the academic, political, and personal, however difficult they may be to untangle.

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Introduction

The Accumulation of Facts: Presenting Paul de Man and Alice Kaplan

"I was dying to show how screwed up intellectuals could get about the truth"[1]

The purpose of this investigation is twofold. On the one hand, this essay will argue that French deconstruction's ideological focus on effacing the personal from all academic projects was a key link in the French avant-garde's relationship with fascism. Then, by referring to the works of Alice Kaplan, a post-holocaust deconstructionist scholar, this project evaluates her efforts to introduce the personal and political perspectives into academic discourse in a way that remains ideologically consistent with her post-structuralist training. In three chapters this project untangles Kaplan's relationships with three fascist characters whom she folds into her academic writing. Central among these characters is the literary scholar Paul de Man, Kaplan's teacher, whose influence haunts all of her academic work. The goal of this project is to emphasize the centrality of the authorial subject in post-war efforts to rescue French avant-garde thought from fascism, and to investigate a mode of scholarship that might help these second-generation scholars resolve the tensions in academia left by fascist intellectuals.

To understand this tension we need to clarify Kaplan's definitions of fascism and of the avant-garde in order to establish her concept of their relationship. For Kaplan, fascism encompasses a perplexing aggregate of polarities: elites working for populist

[1] Alice Kaplan, *French Lessons: A Memoir* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 160.

demands, ancient wisdoms invigorated by the energies of 'youth', a masculine state predicated on maternal longings.[2] In other words, fascism is founded on paradoxes. These seemingly incompatible ideas can only function coherently when the nation's sense of self is divided and fragmented. Fragmentation is driven, by what Kaplan terms "new communications media", i.e., radio, television and photography.[3] This new media separated the senses from each other. Radio focused on voice, while photography fixated on sight. Film completed the destructive phase of this fragmentation when it encouraged people to imagine a "lived experience" for themselves through film.[4] These moviegoers were incorporating film into their memories and therefore their conception of self, which necessarily led to a fragmented self, full of fantasies competing with real experiences.

According to Kaplan, the French intellectual avant-garde contributed to this societal breakdown. Although Kaplan never precisely defines the term "avant-garde," her focus on the modernist movements of European art and writing as well as post-war deconstructive criticism help to illuminate how she conceives the term. Kaplan argues, "dadaism, futurism, and surrealism had linked the aesthetic of fragmentation and destruction to an institutionalized avant-garde."[5] These avant-garde writers focused on the separation of the senses, just as this separation had become "part of the magic aura of the fascist state."[6] In other words, the aestheticization of fragmentation became central to the project of avant-garde art and thought. These French intellectuals write about the sound of Hitler's voice on a loudspeaker or the visual effect of red flags at a rally. Instead of sensing these events simultaneously, the intellectuals concentrate on

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[2] Alice Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1986), 3.
[3] Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality*, 5.
[4] Ibid., 5-6.
[5] Ibid., 4.
[6] Ibid., 7.

one sense at a time.[7] The ostensible purpose of this observation is to offer an explanation of the power of these fascist symbols such as voice and flags. However, by breaking the contemporaneous rhythm of the visual and auditory sensations when describing these rallies and fascists gatherings, the avant-garde is perpetuating the aesthetic picture of a fragmented state.

Because of the voice's powerful ability to convey messages, it is often described by these avant-garde intellectuals. In states that revere charismatic voice, there is also a "reverence for presence, nature, and immediate communication."[8] The seminal deconstructive thinker Jacques Derrida discusses the ways that even in speaking we are mystifying truth. The fascists that Kaplan studies are obsessed with voice- many celebrate Louis-Ferdinand Celine with capturing the euphonic nuances of spoken French in his novels. This "semiotic" language trend appears in avant-garde art "with a liberating, even revolutionary effect."[9] These aesthetically conceived fragmentations are dangerous when "used politically."[10] We can trace the "desires that put the [fascist] bureaucracies in power" by discovering when and where these avant-garde theories of voice and technology are "socially conceived."[11] The twentieth century peculiarly French form of fascism that involved an "aestheticization of politics" was influenced by an academic conception of voice and art. French intellectualism is inextricably linked to French fascism.[12]

For Kaplan, the most important of these avant-garde intellectuals was Paul de Man, her teacher at Yale who embodied the liminal space between fascist aesthetics and politics. De Man

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[7] Ibid., 7.
[8] Ibid., 8.
[9] Ibid., 13.
[10] Ibid., 13.
[11] Ibid., 13.
[12] David Carroll, *French Literary Fascism: Nationalism, Anti-Semitism, and the Ideology of Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

was born in Belgium in 1919 and immigrated to the United States in 1948. After he graduated from Harvard with a Ph.D. in comparative literature, de Man spent most of his time in America teaching literary theory to graduate students in elite universities.[13] He began working at Yale in 1970, and quickly formed a cult-like following of students interested in his new form of literary criticism: deconstruction. Called by some critics a "connoisseur of nothingness," de Man was invested in "disinterested close analysis" of text."[14]

As Kaplan eruditely explains in her memoir, deconstructive critics believe that "there is something inherently deceitful about language."[15] The critic's job is then to "find the places where language breaks down, by looking up close and finding language's sleight of hand."[16] In his *New Yorker* article on de Man, Louis Menand explains that as readers we grant meaning to words as we read them, because we bring our own contexts and habits to a piece of text. These "mental habits" help us leap to logical conclusions about the meaning of texts.[17] De Man searches for the plethora of meanings that pass unnoticed in a cursory reading. For example, he infamously enjoys quoting a line from Keats: "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" To most of us this line translates to "we cannot know the dancer from the dance"; however, de Man enjoys revealing how the line could also mean "please, tell me how to distinguish the dancer from the dance?" The distinction may seem simple, but the two translated phrases have

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[13] De Man received his Ph.D. from Harvard University in comparative literature, even though he did not finish his dissertation and he nearly failed his final exams. In order to gain admittance to the Ph.D. program, de Man doctored his university transcript to make it appear as though he had a university degree. Biographic information on de Man came from Louis Menand, "The De Man Case: Does a Critic's Past Explain his Criticism?" (*The New Yorker*. March 24, 2014)

[14] Menand, "The De Man Case: Does a Critic's Past Explain his Criticism?" and Kaplan, *French Lessons*, 153.
[15] Kaplan, *French Lessons*, 149.
[16] Ibid., 149.
[17] Louis Menand, "The De Man Case: Does a Critic's Past Explain his Criticism?"

different meanings. How can we reconcile these two meanings of the same line? Louis Menand notes that such a deconstructive reading "complicates lines that are usually read as a celebration of Romantic symbolism, lines about the union of sign and referent, word and thing, and turns the poem into a reflection on its own aesthetic ideology."[18] De Man fragments an otherwise closed circuit of meaning by creating a distance between writing as the signifier and the things or ideas it signifies. His theory is centered around this breakdown and destruction of language, which has clear resonances with fascism's relationship with the avant-garde.

De Man was a fascist collaborator. He worked as a writer for two Nazi-controlled Belgian newspapers and as an editor at a pro-Nazi publishing house. He published one particularly anti-Semitic article which seemed to confirm his youthful bigotry. This article shocked the Yale de Manians when a graduate student discovered de Man's past in the spring of 1987: "the revelation upended the image [the Yale school] had formed."[19] De Man, and by proxy deconstruction, were put through a frenzied trial in the media. While the de Manians claimed that the very essence of his theory showed remorse and repentance for his past, the anti-Deconstructionists claimed that de Man was hiding behind this "veil of disinterestedness" in order to cover and negate his rocky past.[20] As a rule, deconstruction separates the author from the text. Context and paratext, such as the biographical information about the author, was unimportant and would add no value to a close reading. An academic debate ensued. Did de Man selfishly cling to this theory because it seemed to make his past irrelevant to his current work, or was this theory his way of "distancing himself from the ideological positions he took in the

[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Kaplan, *French Lessons*, 174.

1940s, his penance"?[21] In other words, did de Man divorce himself from the personal or from the political? Deconstruction rejects both, as it envisions a world of unbiased academic research. Deconstructive readings too readily devolve into ambiguous rhetorical maneuvering; as Menand wisely concludes, deconstruction is like "digging a hole in the middle of the ocean with a shovel made of water."[22]

Of course, like all academic debates, the question of the political and ethical status of deconstruction waned as the academy adopted new disputes. By the turn of the twenty-first century the era of deconstruction was over, as both the personal and the political invaded literary criticism once again. And though deconstruction is no longer central to critical theory in the humanities, it leaves its traces, including the unanswered question central to this project —how do academics that are one-generation removed from World War II respond to these visible remnants of fascism, like de Man? Alice Kaplan is uniquely qualified in her response to this debate insofar as her work invokes both the personal and the political dimensions of an academic *habitus*.

Kaplan studied under de Man as a Yale graduate student. She, like many of his other students, fought for the approval of their idolized teacher. While she soon realized that de Man's teaching style was mediocre, she remained loyal to both her former teacher and his theory for years after his death. When writing her dissertation she chose a historical period that forced a confrontation with historical and social context, namely France in the 1940s. Kaplan's dissertation displays her qualms with French academia. She writes that "as much as I loved France, I was dying to find the country's blemishes, her crimes….maybe I could have it both

[21] Alice Kaplan, "Paul de Man and Auto-biography" (The *Journal of Twentieth-Century/Contemporary French Studies*, no.1, 1998), 33.
[22] Louis Menand, "The De Man Case: Does a Critic's Past Explain his Criticism?"

ways- I could deconstruct fascism, and I could show that intellectuals were just as subject as anyone else to fascist longings."[23] In other words, she was well-versed in "outing" academics before the de Man scandal even broke. She had a personal relationship with de Man, an understanding of the political history fueling the debate, and she, as a former student of de Man's, had a familiarity with deconstructive theory. Given these tools, Kaplan should have been able to publish a convincing condemnation of the former fascist, or at least offer insight on what effect the fascist tendencies had on his later work. This was, after all, her stated project. And she does indeed come around to writing about her former teacher; twice, in fact. However, in each case, and unlike much of her other work, she admits to reproducing the very structure of a typical de Man article, and manages not to *condemn* but to *adopt* his "cool disinterest" in her tone.[24] She later laments, "At the moment of my greatest glee, the moment when I finally had something on my most enigmatic, famous teacher— just what I had always longed for! - I had reproduced the dry analysis, emotional deadpan, and the confusing flourish at the end. De Man's way."[25] She fails to draw any conclusions. Instead, she finishes her article with that same tricky line of Keats that de Man so enjoyed: "How can we know the dancer from the dance?"

Kaplan is not the first de Manian who attempts to forgive or even defend de Man in her analysis of his early work. Dominick LaCapra, a professor of history and comparative literature at Cornell University, wrote an article analyzing the nature of contemporary responses to the de Man scandal, aptly titled "The Personal, the Political and the Textual: Paul de Man as Object of Transference."[26] LaCapra argues that, for some of these scholars, de Man was "almost sacred," a

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[23] Kaplan, *French Lessons*, 159.
[24] Ibid., 170.
[25] Ibid., 170.
[26] Dominick La Capra, "The Personal, the Political and the Textual: Paul de Man as Object of Transference" *History and Memory* (1992): 5-38.

status which intensified the effects of the "traumatic" scandal on scholarship.[27] De Man's intellectual following transferred their desires, namely the desire that de Man was innocent, onto de Man's work. De Man's inability to grapple with his traumatic past is repeated by those who need to "thematize" their anger at de Man instead of ignoring and denying it.[28] These academics "exaggerate traces of self-construction in [de Man's] early writing to rewrite the past in a manner that underwrites a more "positive" identity in the present."[29] LaCapra focuses his study on three particularly forgiving de Manians: Shoshana Felman, Jacques Derrida, and Fredric Jameson. One of these authors goes as far as comparing de Man to Primo Levi, an Auschwitz survivor, in order to excuse de Man's silence on the subject of the Holocaust by placing him in the role of a victim. All of these scholars show how "deconstruction can be used to prove virtually anything by rewriting the past in the light of present interests and desires."[30]

Though Alice Kaplan is not one of the main subjects of the article, her first essay on de Man is mentioned twice. Kaplan's first article on de Man argued that the "multiplicity of approaches" in de Man's anti-Semitism "might for their very disagreements...give the appearance of respectable discussion."[31] It is curious that LaCapra spends so little time analyzing Kaplan's work on de Man, given Kaplan's close relationship with her teacher along with abiding focus on the relationship between avant garde academics and fascist politics. While she is not a major player in his paper, it is clear that she conforms to most contemporary de Manian responders in that she deconstructs bigotry into meaningless rhetoric. LaCapra ends his discussion by calling for the establishment of a "post-traumatic identity," one which could posit

[27] Ibid., 8
[28] Ibid., 5
[29] Ibid., 10
[30] Ibid., 20
[31] Ibid., 24

real connections between deconstruction, history and politics.[32] LaCapra discovered this unique trend in academia's responses to de Man. What is still lacking in current scholarship is a close analysis of the manner in which an individual academic comes to manifest such strangely forgiving tendencies and the way in which they overcome such an impetus and establish their own "post-de Man" identities.

In studying the intellectual career of Alice Kaplan we can frame some of the most crucial issues for thinking through this connection between academic, personal, and political identities. Through this microhistory, I can trace how this important scholar worked through an academic upbringing haunted by her teacher's fall from grace, focusing on the confrontation between this Jewish scholar and her fascist mentor, and concluding with a re-reading of her most perplexing work, a book on the trial of Robert Brasillach, a French polemicist and film critic who was executed in February of 1945 for his fascist writings.

This project follows Kaplan's career across three distinct eras of her life, each framed with a specific focus on one of her writings, and centered around her relationship with de Man. The first chapter concentrates on Kaplan's response to the realization that her teacher was a collaborator. Her first article on de Man, published in a book of responses to the de Man scandal, illuminates her struggle to grasp the guilt of her fascist teacher. She invokes numerous arguments in hopes of exonerating de Man, or at least lessening his culpability.

The second chapter builds on her initial struggle with the de Man scandal. I analyze her second article on de Man, published nearly 10 years after the scandal and her memoir, *French Lessons*, which gives us her personal thoughts about the relationship several years later. Kaplan's

[32] Ibid., 31

relationship with de Man evolved after his death, but ultimately she continued to defend his reputation, and his choice to remain silent about his fascist past.

The third, and final chapter returns to her most perplexing work, the last text that she has published on fascism. *The Collaborator* narrates Robert Brasillach's story through his trial and execution. Brasillach, like our other fascists, wrote for pro-Nazi newspapers during the war. He had the misfortune of a trial date set during war-time, so he was killed while others whose wartime crimes may have been more severe received a mere year in jail. Her thrilling take on Brasillach reads like a detective novel, as she wades through evidence and personalities almost as if she is putting Brasillach on the stand herself. What has inspired comment from so many of the book's readers is that her verdict re-condemns the man. Brasillach is already condemned and very much dead; frankly it is difficult to ascertain what exactly Kaplan accomplishes by reiterating Brasillach's faults. Building on my first two chapters, I argue that Kaplan's re-condemning of Brasillach functions as a proxy trial for her teacher, Paul de Man, whom she had failed to confront more directly in earlier writings.

Ultimately this project hopes to alleviate some of the stigma of inserting, intentionally or otherwise, personal bias into academic projects. By examining Kaplan's work, I hope to demonstrate the impossibility of objective research, while also showing that the personal and political are inseparable from even the most self-aware academic writing. Kaplan's inability to fully evaluate de Man on an ethical scale reveals the shortcomings of a deconstruction methodology, namely that while it is useful for analyzing rhetoric, it is unable to account for the ethical implications of historical actions. In turn, this project attempts to elucidate the benefits we gain from studying the overlooked space between the academic, political, and personal, however difficult they may be to untangle.

Chapter One

The Prosecution Strikes: Responding to the de Man Scandal

"I cried when I got the news — cried for the death of my student life, more than for the distant teacher"[33]

Between 1940 and 1942, Paul de Man wrote for two Nazi-controlled Belgian newspapers and worked as an editor at a pro-Nazi publishing house. The article which most fully revealed de Man as a Nazi collaborator, a March 4, 1941 publication that included an anti-Semitic attack on Jewish writers and artists, was written for a newspaper called *Le Soir*. *Le Soir* was the "biggest daily in Belgium" and therefore completely under Nazi control.[34] *Le Soir* commonly highlighted anti-Semitic content on its front page, and de Man touted the party line in his weekly column "Our Literary Chronicle."[35] De Man, still only 21 years old, obtained a position on the staff because his uncle had connections to the newspaper.

Three years after de Man's death, a Belgian graduate student discovered these collaborationist articles. He informed a few of de Man's students, who quickly spread the word among de Man's followers. In their effort to remain honest and open, these deconstructive critics released all of de Man's wartime journalism (almost 200 articles).[36] At least two books of critical responses by deconstructive scholars were published in companion volumes shortly following the release of de Man's wartime articles. Alice Kaplan's article, "Paul de Man, Le Soir, and the

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[33] Alice Kaplan, *French Lessons: A Memoir*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 166.
[34] Louis Menand, "The De Man Case: Does a Critic's Past Explain his Criticism?" (*The New Yorker*, March 24, 2014).
[35] Menand, "The De Man Case".
[36] Ibid.

Francophone Collaborators (1940-1942)," was published in *Responses: On Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism* a year after the scandal broke. Although Kaplan's aims in the article are not entirely clear, she seems to focus on placing de Man back into a wartime context — measuring his actions against those of other collaborators. Given deconstruction's antagonistic relationship with the rhetorical relevance of context, Kaplan's reliance on context in her argument is unexpected. In her treatment of de Man, Kaplan attempts to appear neutral. In fact, towards the end of the article she claims she went for an "emotional deadpan" approach.[37] However, this show of neutrality obscures an intricate argument which defends de Man's reputation. A close analysis of Kaplan's rhetorical choices reveals that the context she provides does not serve to explore the personal within the academic, but acts instead to save deconstruction's reputation and exonerate de Man in the process.

In this chapter I show how Kaplan grapples with the different sides of de Man — the man at the center of a prominent literary theory and the man who knowingly wrote anti-Semitic propaganda. Kaplan separates aspects of her charismatic teacher into distinct categories in an effort to reconcile the charming professor with the fascist collaborator. Her battle in this first article is two-fold: she's fighting the scholars who are trying to discredit her field and her teacher, and she's also challenging her own conception of her teacher by inventing creative solutions to sidestep a complete condemnation of de Man. Kaplan's argument is confusing because it forces de Man into academic, personal, and political identities when in fact, as her article inadvertently demonstrates, these categories are indivisible.

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[37] Alice Kaplan, "Paul de Man, Le Soir, and the Francophone Collaborators (1940-1942)" in *Responses: On Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 278.

Kaplan begins her article by offering a brief summary of de Man's involvement with fascism and explaining how he escaped facing any criminal charges after the war. She says that she will be placing de Man into his wartime context by providing information on his fascist peers, his possible French role models, and even the layout of his magazine. She launches into a short discussion about life under occupation in wartime Belgium, focusing on the number of men away from home, the strange new rules and regulations imposed by the Nazi government, and the constant fear of bombings. Following this description, she claims that "the problem of perspective" is "inevitable in reading de Man's wartime activities."[38] Kaplan claims that de Man's collaborationist journalism was not a unique betrayal of his nation. She then recounts some of the common themes present in de Man's writings, particularly his defense of surrealism and his fidelity to "all the clichés of fascist nationalism."[39] Kaplan summarizes the arguments available to fascist writers, covering conservative writers such as Robert Poulet, Pierre Daye, Frederic Grimm and even Robert Brasillach. Kaplan not only explains these writers' arguments, she also explains how de Man responded to each of these right-wing authors. After detailing de Man's thoughts on many of the popular pro-Nazi authors, and giving the reader a sense of where de Man fell on the political spectrum, Kaplan introduces de Man's most scandalous article: "Les Juifs dans la littérature actuelle." In this article, published on March 4, 1941, de Man claims that it would be easy to censor Jews of out the Western literary canon because they have not infiltrated the canon, as their writing is mediocre. Kaplan compares the arguments to the other anti-Semitic articles that were included in the magazine on March 4th. She concludes that the magazine's anti-Semitic stance was "doctrinally confusing," as the individual writers do not agree on a specific brand of anti-Semitism.

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[38] Kaplan, "Paul de Man, Le Soir, and the Francophone Collaborators (1940-1942)", 267.
[39] Ibid., 268.

However, Kaplan also notes that de Man's version of anti-Semitism is the only version among these that is logically and internally consistent. Kaplan then returns to de Man's thoughts on surrealism, showing the reader a number of ways he defied the Nazi line in order to defend the free expression of art. In her conclusion she reveals her personal relationship to de Man, and explains how that relationship convinced her to aim "for an emotional deadpan" and focus more on "placing de Man's writing in a field" rather than give an "ultimate assessment."[40] She restates her belief that the historical gap between de Man's occupied-Belgium and the contemporary moment of 1988 will be hard for her readers to bridge, and that the problem of perspective will haunt this discussion. On the following page she observes the similarity between the writing styles of the fascist de Man and her teacher de Man. She ends with a brief justification of de Man's silence on his past, a defense that foreshadows her second article which expands on that very topic.

Kaplan's article on de Man oscillates between heralding de Man's uniqueness and insisting on his averageness. He's "brilliant for the way he argues his position" but "banal because a thousand other intellectuals claimed the same high ground, reached the same conclusions."[41] Kaplan is not wrong to remind the reader that de Man is one of many fascist collaborators who penned anti-Semitic rhetoric. By itself, this quote simply provides the reader with a context for viewing de Man's *Le Soir* work. However, Kaplan goes beyond simply providing historical context by continually undercutting the significance of de Man's fascist work with warnings to the reader about the "problem of perspective that is inevitable in reading

[40] Ibid., 278.
[41] Ibid., 268.

de Man's wartime writing."[42] The "brilliance" of his argument is never questioned or even examined except in comparison to works that Kaplan considers inferior. The fascist nature of these arguments or "conclusions" is always considered in relation to "intellectuals on the right and on the left" who "reconciled themselves to publishing in Nazi-occupied Europe."[43] His brilliance is one-of-a-kind while his bigotry is merely commonplace. Because of this brilliance, Kaplan suggests that de Man's perceived bigotry deserves a certain level of intellectual consideration that would not be afforded to a typical collaborator.

Kaplan is careful in her arguments; she claims that de Man's brilliance is limited only to his writing style. His work as a "unique and original critic" does not mean his "wartime activities were themselves a unique phenomenon;" in fact, Kaplan points out that "collaboration, the decision to throw in one's lot with the "new order," was far from rare."[44] By using an inexact comparative such as "far from rare" the article implicitly downplays the importance of de Man's fascist work by making it seem as though collaboration was the natural path for intellectuals from both sides. Moreover, Kaplan's definition of collaboration — "throwing in one's lot with the new order" — is such a low threshold that it would encompass nearly all citizens who did not resist outright, which ultimately minimizes de Man's level of involvement. The meaning of the term is so diluted that de Man's behavior is associated with the expected behavior of a citizen in an occupied country. The reader is asked to refrain from complete condemnation of de Man because he was not the only racist, and he was certainly not the first or worst racist. The content of de Man's work is forgettable if not forgivable because it was ordinary.

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[42] Ibid., 267.
[43] Ibid., 267.
[44] Ibid., 267.

Kaplan reports that she intended to place de Man in dialogue with other fascist writers, and show the reader the "paper air [de Man] breathes."[45] However, like her juxtaposition of the banal and the brilliant, juxtaposing de Man with other fascists ends with de Man appearing as one of the "lesser" anti-Semites — the best of the fascist crowd. In one of Kaplan's few bold claims, at the beginning of her discussion of "Les Juifs dans la littérature actuelle," she argues that de Man's only overtly anti-Semitic article "can be read as de Man's way of saying he doesn't take the anti-Semitic genre seriously."[46] If we, as readers, believe this argument, then de Man is not only "forgiven" as a collaborator, but, perhaps, even credited for his resistance to the Nazi party line.

Kaplan quickly moves from that implausible conclusion to a more complicated exoneration of de Man which involves placing him in the context of other anti-Semitic pamphlet writers. First, Kaplan establishes two distinct communities within collaboration: the "average" collaborators, and the community of "racial theorists."[47] De Man is placed into her first category, as he is not overtly concerned with race or the Jews except for his one March 4th article. She removes de Man from the herd of malignant racists and places him into a slightly morally superior category. Then, she reads de Man's article in the context of other famous anti-Semitic articles and against other anti-Semitic work that was submitted to *Le Soir*. These comparisons enable Kaplan to conclude that de Man's article is not anti-Semitic, rather "it is against vulgar anti-Semites" and appears "initially more motivated by elitism than racial thinking."[48]

Eventually Kaplan begins analyzing small pieces of de Man's article which includes quotes so drenched with anti-Semitism that one cannot say they are simply "elitist." Reckoning

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[45] Ibid., 266.
[46] Ibid., 273.
[47] Ibid., 268.
[48] Ibid., 273.

with these damning words, Kaplan cleverly claims: "De Man would seem to offer his own intellectual contribution to the debate among anti-Semites by taking even higher ground: he proposes that the Jews won't, can't, haven't infiltrated Western literature...because they are mediocre."[49] Kaplan immediately follows this assertion (which looks like evidence of de Man's guilt) with arguments about how claims of Jewish mediocrity and insignificance appear throughout the more "vulgar" anti-Semitic papers of other writers. De Man's anti-Semitic claim was not new or even undiscovered; in fact, it was "banal" and, therefore, forgivable. The "brilliant" part of de Man's article is that he forces these "banal" statements into a logically sound argument. While other "vulgar" anti-Semites alternate between cries about Jewish mediocrity and laments about the Jewish takeover of all high-class art and politics, de Man astutely states that Belgian culture will hardly notice the absence of Jewry from its art and literature because the Jewish contributions are so insignificant. Again, de Man's writing style is unique and praiseworthy, while his actual racist sentiments are the responsibility of the "vulgar" fascist crowd. Kaplan is attempting to resurrect de Man's reputation as a critic by showing that his rhetorical techniques are not only valid, but clever, and that the content of his writing is mundane enough to be forgettable.

Kaplan's ultimate conclusion about this most controversial de Man article is that de Man "participates...in the legitimization of anti-Semitism."[50] Her reasoning conforms to the evidence she presented — de Man elevated a weak anti-Semitic stance into a logically sound argument against the Jews. However, her own conclusion is weak in that "participates" is barely an evaluative verb. She does not discuss to what extent de Man participated, thereby shutting down any debate regarding what degree of culpability he might have. If we remember the context of

[49] Ibid., 274.
[50] Ibid., 275.

Kaplan's article, namely the de Man affair and the frenzy of scholarly debate that ensued after a graduate student discovered anti-Semitic articles de Man wrote for a Nazi-controlled newspaper, we will see that her conclusion was actually the impetus for writing this article. The intellectual public was already aware that de Man had "participated" in a racist regime. These essays were to examine what relationship that participation had to his character and his legacy: the deconstruction movement. Instead, Kaplan concludes by presenting the statement: "[de Man] participates...in the legitimization of anti-Semitism;" this is an established fact about de Man that should have been the entrance into an analytical discussion about his degree of culpability. Instead, Kaplan uses this fact as her conclusion. Rhetorically, conclusively using the premise as an ending point in debate precludes further discussion of the topic. She preempts further exploration of the depths and effects of his anti-Semitism.

Kaplan employed additional methods to quash debate over de Man's culpability. Kaplan eloquently traces the various strands of anti-Semitism present in wartime Belgium and France, and she places de Man in this context. However, the historical context is only a piece of the de Man puzzle. For de Man to maintain his standing in the current intellectual community, his articles would need to meet current ethical and moral standards. Kaplan's only nod to contemporary ethical debate is her plea for the reader to "wonder 'who the hell are we, writing today, to think we know what it was like to write under a sky riddled with bombs, to face being sent to a labor camp,' and also to imagine the yellow stars on the streets, the Gestapo raids, the disappearances."[51] Kaplan not only does not position de Man on a moral spectrum, she warns the reader that doing so would be preposterous, as he cannot be removed from his historical context. Kaplan uses the baseline context that she provided for the reader in order to set up experiential

[51] Ibid., 278.

equivalence, rendering any comparative historical study meaningless. The grotesque irony in using Belgian Jewish deaths to mitigate a fascist's guilt must have escaped Kaplan. The argument is tinted with situational irony in that Kaplan attempts to use historical context to mitigate the culpability of her former teacher, a man who made his name fighting against context (in part because he believed that context could obscure any real truth in the words of a document, a fear that is realized in Kaplan's article about him). Her insistence on keeping de Man in a context cage protects him from further dialogue on his involvement.

While Kaplan insists that the content of de Man's writing remains trapped within its historical context, she paradoxically insists that the tightness of his argumentation transcend such historical boundaries. Unlike other de Man defenders, Kaplan is not willing to dismiss de Man's early work as mere" juvenilia."[52] Kaplan downplays the content of de Man's fascist work because it is banal, but praises the same work for its unique and "brilliant" writing style and argument structure.[53] Kaplan connects this earlier de Man to the post-war de Man through his writing style. His writing style, therefore, needs to be "unique" and separate from those of other collaborators; otherwise, he would still have ties to the fascist community. Kaplan argues: "de Man's writing in *Le Soir* had from very early on, distinguished itself ever so slightly from the collaborationist idiom by an elitist avant-gardism that's hard to label politically, but that could be said to anticipate de Man's subsequent positions of the 1960s and 1970s."[54] The thread connecting post-war de Man to wartime de Man is explicitly defined as distinct from collaboration, but only vaguely defined for what it actually constitutes. Kaplan further defines this uniqueness by listing de Man's divergences from the collaborationist "idiom", namely his

[52] Ibid., 266.
[53] Ibid., 268.
[54] Ibid., 276.

"impatience with Brasillach's political fantasies" and "his disdain with a politics that borrows anything at all from literary expression;" these grievances appear "to be all his own."[55] It seems that even the wartime de Man was deconstructive in that he wanted politics to stay away from art. Instead of divorcing the deconstructive movement from de Man's fascist past, Kaplan reveals the relationship between them. Kaplan assures the reader that the connection was not "because of anything he said," but rather "it was his strategies his process -so familiar- that I recognized across the frontier of 1976 and 1940."[56] His deconstructive writing style can transcend the limitations of historical context in a way that the content of his writing could not. Kaplan claims that historical distance can hinder a reader's judgment of de Man's ethical actions, but apparently this same distance does inhibit the reader's ability to judge rhetorical choices.

Kaplan is so invested in heralding de Man's writing style that she compares it to scholarship today in an effort to make it appear ordinary.

> The most insidious statements in de Man's column are, to my mind, made in the name of rigor and a search for higher ground. He declared himself more rigorous in his view of Germany than mystified Brasillach; more sophisticated and witty in dismissing Jewish writers than "vulgar" anti-Semites. I'm struck by the same general strategies in academic writing by how comforting it is to compare one's own position to a more vulgar one. He depended on disdain then, and we still do now.[57]

[55] Ibid., 272.
[56] Ibid., 278.
[57] Ibid., 278.

Kaplan merges the unique and mundane elements of de Man by taking the aspects of his writing that were unique and viewing them as commonplace in current academia. In this way, not only can de Man and his methods be linked to other scholars, but it appears as though his writing left a legacy in academia. He originated a unique style back in the 1940s, and if that style currently seems mundane it must be because it has been so heavily disseminated throughout the academic community. She is defending deconstruction as well as de Man by defending de Man's legacy. She is attempting to show the impact deconstruction had on the academic world while also hinting that de Man was a major reason for that huge influence. In this way, she is trying to exonerate both her teacher and the theory at the same time. Barely out of graduate school, Kaplan's loyalty to her teacher might stem from her loyalty to the theory. Deconstruction defined her foundational academic career and the entire theory was under attack soon after she began her professional career. She has a personal stake in ensuring that her academic upbringing is not discredited. De Man was the symbol of this debate, and it's possible that she latched on to that symbol in her need to restore deconstruction's reputation.

In the article's conclusion Kaplan returns to a defense of de Man. She maintains that reading de Man's early work against that of other wartime collaborators "puts into relief their fascist and anti-Semitic effects, but I say effects, not intentions, since these I cannot gauge."[58] Using deconstructive logic Kaplan avoids the conclusion that de Man had the intention of being racist. While she rebels against deconstruction by including context, she embraces the elements of deconstruction's logic which allow her to ignore de Man's faults. However, Kaplan does speculate about de Man's intentions when she believes they are valiant. She feels that de Man's "political career" was motivated "by a need to isolate himself from the kinds of political choices

[58] Ibid., 278.

that European intellectuals were forced to make between 1940 and 1945 and that de Man most likely believed he had made badly".[59] Therefore, de Man "worked against his early work".[60] Kaplan only holds that de Man worked "against" his wartime journalism in that his new academic scholarship had a drastically different focus. Kaplan reiterates that this new scholarship was coming from "the same man, the same emotional structures in 1942 and 1981;" de Man "didn't repeat himself in the slogans, but in the skepticism, the elitism, the demands for rigor."[61] She consistently argues that the writing style was the sole survivor of the war, and that de Man's fascism disappeared like the Belgian Jews.

Kaplan hints at her intentions throughout the article, wavering from scholar to devout student in her somewhat disparate approaches to the material. Near the beginning of her article Kaplan states her purpose: to "reconsider the post-war de Man and my own intellectual context."[62] Though it encompasses a personal element, this approach would be largely scholarly as it would revolve around a dialogue about de Man and where deconstruction fits in post- de Man scandal academia. Near the end of her work, Kaplan revises her strategy, choosing instead to aim for "an emotional deadpan", citing "respect for the de Man who taught me ways to read clichés" and her own "need to establish boundaries with the material" as reasons for the shift.[63] By pulling back into the impersonal, and refusing conclusions, Kaplan is protecting her teacher. While she might only intend to protect herself from too passionate an involvement in the scandal, her performative neutrality produces a form of the "bystander effect" in that she watches the de Man debate while pointedly not taking a stand. In fact, she claims: "I was more concerned here

[59] Ibid., 278.
[60] Ibid., 279.
[61] Ibid., 279.
[62] Ibid., 268.
[63] Ibid., 278.

with doing the work of placing de Man's writing in a field than with an ultimate 'assessment,' a 'right or wrong,' 'good or evil' .... I wanted to give the reader...a sense of the distance that separates 1988 and 1940, and that makes assessment of his actions so difficult."[64] She fails to condemn de Man for his actions by focusing instead on the challenges associated with condemning collaborators. She has again returned to context as a way to exonerate de Man — as if the sheer number of years separating the present from de Man's actions pose an impossible obstacle to an evaluation of those actions. Kaplan says she never gives an ultimate assessment and technically that is true, but she leads the reader towards the idea that de Man is, if not innocent, then forgivable.

[64] Ibid., 278.

Chapter Two

The Defense of de Man: Using Deconstruction to Justify de Man's Silence

"He was interested in autobiography — as an impossible genre, a kind of emblem of deconstruction, where the more you try to confess, the more you lie"[65]

Nearly five years after the publication of her first article on de Man, Kaplan writes a memoir that covers everything from her first spoken sentence to her life as a professor. In *French Lessons: A Memoir*, de Man appears first as the enigmatic professor students fought to please and later as the focal point of the scandal that shook the deconstructive world. Kaplan's memoir is one of the only places where she openly discusses her revelations about these key events in her academic career, though these personal thoughts are not unfiltered, given the retrospective process inherent in writing an autobiography. That said, Kaplan's memoir helps clarify her personal relationship to de Man; indeed, its mere existence is a rebellion of sorts considering deconstruction's strained relationship with autobiography.

Five years after the de Man scandal, Kaplan has shed her defensive response and adopted a somewhat more cynical view of de Man himself. In her memoir she laments his teaching style and focuses on his failures as an educator, promising to do better for her own students. Kaplan admits that she was ultimately unhappy with her first article on her teacher, which perhaps prompted her second article on de Man, an article published about five years after her memoir. In this article, "Paul de Man and Auto-biography," Kaplan returns to de Man and imitates his deconstructive writing style as she discusses de Man's relationship to autobiography and the

[65] Alice Kaplan, *French Lessons: A Memoir*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 173.

implications that relationship has on his reaction to his fascist past. Though she claims in her memoir that her displeasure with her first article was due to its "emotional deadpan," her arguments in the second article are more elusive.[66] While her first article defends deconstruction and de Man's reputation, her second uses deconstruction to defend de Man's silence about his fascist past.

In this second article, under the guise of reexamining de Man's understanding of autobiography in light of the de Man affair, Alice Kaplan is actually augmenting her original defense of de Man. Unlike her first article, in which she explicitly defends de Man's academic reputation, including his writing style, for its brilliance, this defense is comparatively understated, albeit more personal. In the later article Kaplan appears to withhold judgment in a playful, yet politically charged manner. While in her first article she grapples with the theoretical implications of the realization that her beloved teacher had a fascist side, in the second article she confronts the reason he never took responsibility for his mistakes. Again, she analyzes de Man's argumentation to serve his defense and, in so doing, crafts an article that is structurally similar to his own compositions. Ultimately, the second article culminates in Kaplan's own confession to de Man, an apology of sorts for her role in the de Man scandal media frenzy and for her own memoir's condemnation of de Man.

Before we discuss her elusive and evasive arguments regarding de Man's silence, we should first acknowledge those points in Kaplan's article where her arguments are more straightforward. First, she introduces de Man's primary offense, one that hovers in the background of her larger discussion on de Man's relationship with autobiography. De Man's anti-Semitic article, "Les Juifs dans la littérature actuelle," was one which "struck his friends and

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[66] Kaplan, *French Lessons: A Memoir,* 169.

students the biggest blow."[67] In this article, as Kaplan explains, de Man claims that banning Jews from the Western literary canon will not diminish the quality of Western literature because Jews are so mediocre they never established themselves as gifted writers. Kaplan notes how de Man "referred approvingly to Kafka without mentioning that he was Jewish;" she then asks the reader if this was a "willful playfulness" meant to tease the censor.[68] She includes de Man's reference to Kafka, a reference that may mitigate de Man's culpability, but then she turns the judgement over to the reader — asking us to draw conclusions about why de Man included Kafka, a Jewish anomaly, amongst his other Christian European authors.

Her question leads the reader to think of de Man as a young rebel, an author who intentionally taunts the system for fun. This view of de Man characterizes him as rebellious and stubborn, a "typical" young man, making us less willing to blame him. If we see him as a young rebel, we are more likely to think that he was still, at some level, alienated from this Nazi system and constrained by the times and his position to work for it. By asking this seemingly benign question, Kaplan is actually framing a narrowed, benevolent picture of de Man. Kaplan continues: "Was the mention of Kafka an attempt to subvert an article he was forced to write? Was he a hack, willing to write whatever his editors wanted? Or was he, as he appears to be, an anti-Semite with sophisticated literary taste?"[69] In other words, was de Man a rebel, an amoral hack, or a true anti-Semite?

Kaplan's method of addressing de Man's actions through rhetorical questions appears relatively open and honest insofar as it seems she is letting the reader make decisions about de Man's identity from the various options she has displayed. However, she ultimately answers

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[67] Alice Kaplan, "Paul de Man and Auto-biography", *The Journal of Twentieth Century/Contemporary French Studies* 2, no.1 (1998), 31.
[68] Kaplan, "Paul de Man and Auto-biography",31.
[69] Ibid., 32.

these questions for the reader. Kaplan, who had previously been hiding behind rhetorical questions, offers a concrete conclusion: "De Man argues in his last article on Rousseau that we can't know intentions, only evidence. His article, whatever his intentions, is inexcusable."[70] And just like that she plainly states what had hitherto eluded her writing on de Man. Oddly, at the end of this explicit move to let the reader decide de Man's guilt, she switches her deferential tone into a complete condemnation of de Man's article. What are we to make of this dramatic shift in tone? We will return to this rhetorical interruption later, but first, it is worth acknowledging that while Kaplan fully condemned the article, she still did not condemn the man behind it. Kaplan's only explicit argument comes from this discussion of de Man's *Le Soir* article. Kaplan's more intriguing arguments come from her shrewd textual defense of de Man's silence about his fascist past, where, instead of blatantly asking rhetorically suggestive questions, she employs deconstructive methodologies to hint at a defense of de Man.

In order to set up her culminating defense, Kaplan frames her careful argument with an analysis of the last chapter of de Man's book, *Allegories of Reading*. This rhetorical strategy, providing a detailed summary of a text that is going to be analyzed and employed in the argument, is common in deconstructive writing, particularly de Man's. The chapter that she chose illuminates de Man's thoughts on autobiography; Kaplan uses de Man's arguments and the discussion surrounding them to explain some of de Man's motivations for keeping his past a secret. In this chapter, according to Kaplan, de Man picked apart Rousseau's famed "confession" — where Rousseau admits that he stole a ribbon from an employer in his youth and

[70] Ibid., 32.

blamed a servant girl, leading to her termination. De Man identifies both a cognitive and performative aspect of the confession. The cognitive aspect is based on evidence. For Rousseau, the material evidence is a ribbon he stole from his mistress. The performative aspect is the excuse one gives immediately after the confession. Rousseau blamed a servant girl, Marion, when questioned about the ribbon. Rousseau's actions prompt the mistress to fire Marion, and Rousseau feels guilty. But, of course, it turns out that the young Rousseau only blamed Marion because he fancied her and wanted to give her the stolen ribbon as a gift.

De Man argues that the cognitive and performative aspects of confession cannot perfectly synchronize with one another. So, it makes "perfect sense" that Rousseau names Marion when questioned about the ribbon because the ribbon is a metaphor for Rousseau's desire for Marion.[71] Yet, naming the woman you love does not make sense "ethically or intentionally."[72] This excuse is therefore an "anacoluthon," a "break in the logic" or unexpected "interruption in the expected grammatical or rhetorical movement of a text."[73] This anacoluthon is the "moment when the cognitive and performative systems of the text try to come together and fail."[74] Essentially, there are two different lines of logic that are attempting to coexist simultaneously. Rhetorically, Marion is occupying Rousseau's thoughts and speech because he is in love with her and he is committing this crime in hopes of impressing her with the ribbon. The ribbon and Marion are bound together in his head. Ethically, Rousseau would want to keep Marion as far away from this crime as possible because he loves her and does not want to get her in trouble. He would want to distance Marion from the actual crime itself. In one line of thought Marion is intertwined with the meaning of the ribbon itself, while in the other line of thought Marion is distanced from

[71] Ibid., 28.
[72] Ibid., 28.
[73] Ibid., 28.
[74] Ibid., 28.

the ribbon and the crimes that accompany it. When questioned, Rousseau must "perform" this cognitive disaster which leads to a clash between these two opposing lines of thought. Rousseau ends up blaming Marion for the crime, an unexpected lie, because of this collapse in his lines of logic. The "interruption" is the evidence of these two lines of logic.

The potential self-defense that de Man carves out for himself with this argument is rather obvious. If "there is never confession without excuse lagging right behind," then de Man is not only forgiven for failing to speak about his actions, he is actually noble in his refusal to account for his "thorny past."[75] Confessing would generate a performative excuse, and so, de Man is avoiding excusing his actions by avoiding a public confession. De Man's own arguments against confession excuse and justify his refusal to offer one.

This irony is not lost on Kaplan. Rather than point out the clear parallel between de Man's critique and his own historical circumstances, Kaplan does not explicitly state this defense for the reader. Instead she opts for subtlety: "One can't help sensing in retrospect that the impossibility of a true confession is something to which de Man gave a lot of thought," and that Rousseau's desire "never to speak of the incident again" is one he seconded.[76] She abstains from making any concrete conclusions about his intentions or the implications this confession argument has on the de Man scandal. Yet, she still manages to imply a defense for de Man by drawing the analogy between him and Rousseau. If confession was impossible and, in fact, detrimental to Rousseau, then why would de Man make the mistake of confessing? Withholding judgment is not a neutral position for Kaplan; rather, it is infused with implicit attempts to lead the reader to a defense of de Man. When Kaplan says that "one can't help sensing in retrospect that the impossibility of a true confession is something to which de Man gave a lot of thought,"

[75] Ibid., 27.
[76] Ibid., 27.

she initially appears to say nothing; it reads like one of the throwaway filler sentences writers use to connect two subjects or ideas. However, when read in the context of her first article's insistence on exonerating de Man we can see that in this sentence Kaplan is actually deciding that de Man put a great deal of consideration into his decision not to talk about his past. Therefore, Kaplan has drawn a conclusion about de Man's intentions. She indicates that his silence was the result of his well-thought-out arguments against confession and not the result of shame or selfishness.

Kaplan's article, which appears more and more like a defense of de Man's silence as it continues, uses other historically relevant figures to lend credibility to her implied defense of de Man. Instead of explicitly saying that she believes that de Man's thoughts on autobiography help explain his reluctance to confess, Kaplan cites Derrida's justification of de Man's silence. Derrida, "referred to de Man's reading of Rousseau as the ultimate statement...where 'everything is said' about the impossibility of saying."[77] Derrida says what Kaplan will not: that de Man's critical work on autobiography thoroughly explains his refusal to confess. Kaplan seems to hide behind Derrida's words, as if she is reluctant to admit that she agrees with them. In other words, although she includes this quotation in her article, she does not comment on Derrida's conclusion: Derrida's defense is a stand-alone paragraph, mirroring Derrida's own conclusion that "everything is said." If she disagreed with Derrida, it is fair to assume that she would write a counterargument. Again, her silence speaks volumes. By citing Derrida, she has the opportunity to offer a defense of de Man while avoiding the repercussions associated with doing so, as she does not explicitly state such a defense. She legitimizes the defense by showing that a politically important figure in the deconstructive world supports her position.

[77] Ibid., 34.

After Kaplan uses Derrida to grant authority to de Man's idea of confession, she attempts to eliminate the possibility of fighting against de Man's logic. Kaplan cleverly accomplishes this strategic move to grant authority to de Man's original argument by showing how de Man's argument "legitimates the study of autobiography."[78] Apparently, de Man's work has made analysis of autobiography possible by "showing that its logical tensions do not spring from an individual subject's inadequacies, but are the objective expressions of linguistic predicament."[79] Therefore, if, as a reader sympathetic to the methods of deconstruction, you refuse to accept de Man's conclusions about confession, you are undermining the field of autobiography, since it is based on de Man's logic. Essentially, it would be difficult to disagree with de Man without taking autobiography as a genre down with him — a heavy task she places on those scholars who wish to condemn de Man and yet maintain fidelity to the deconstructive methodology he helped establish. By showing that de Man is inseparable from critical discourse in autobiography, Kaplan begins to establish how challenging and perhaps impossible it would be to extract de Man from any deconstructive reading.

Kaplan attempts to further preclude the possibility of countering de Man by introducing more of de Man's remarks on autobiography. As in the Rousseau chapter, Kaplan does not make any explicit commentary on these de Manian analyses, but the motivation for including these extra summaries of de Man's positions becomes clear once the arguments are examined. In 1964 de Man wrote an article for the *New York Review* on Sartre's autobiography, *Les Mots*. In this article de Man chastises Sartre for letting "political action" overshadow genuine personal experience. After reading a successful autobiography "you should learn more about yourself, but

[78] Ibid., 28.
[79] Ibid., 28-29.

forget about the author," and Sartre's *Les Mots* was "an act of self-therapy" that "can't teach you about yourself."[80]

After this page-long informative summary of de Man's early thoughts on autobiography, Kaplan switches topics, again, abstaining from any commentary that might frame her position on de Man's theoretical perspective or political obligation to disclose his fascist past. She offers no conclusions of her own, and actually inserts not just a new paragraph, but a small row of ellipses to indicate that a new section of her article is beginning. However, her silence does not obscure the clear message behind including this de Manian insight: successful autobiography reveals more about the person reading it than it does about its own author. If you are reading de Man's work as autobiography, then anything you conclude will pertain more to your own neurosis than to his.

The above argument assumes that the author is successful, a major caveat that de Man remedies in his last article on autobiography, "Autobiography as Defacement." This 1979 article argues that autobiography is not a genre but an inescapable condition, the "imprint of your personality and experience are going to seep through" into whatever you write.[81] In this sense, "all writing is autobiographical," and yet "no text is satisfactorily autobiographical."[82] Therefore, any author writing about de Man, even if de Man's writing were unsuccessful, will inadvertently insert their own personal experience into their reading of de Man's theory. While this insertion is not necessarily negative or untrustworthy, its existence introduces the idea of bias in all academic work. Once bias is introduced opponents can more easily claim that conclusions were falsely drawn. Of course, this whole argument assumes the correctness of de

[80] Ibid., 29-30.
[81] Ibid., 34-35.
[82] Ibid., 35.

Man's theory about autobiography, a trivially true theory with a universal reach that practically ensures its meaninglessness.

Kaplan demonstrates this descent into personal bias and meaninglessness by showing us two different scholars' reviews of de Man's work. The scholars she chooses to focus on both study de Man's essay on Rousseau, and both derive different, almost contrasting conclusions. Derrida sees the Rousseau article "as an allegory of de Man's struggle around the issue of confession;" Derrida believes that de Man in sincerely grappling with the morality and rhetorical practicality of confession and that de Man's conclusions about confession were the result of close-reading and analysis.[83] David Lehman, however, believes that the article was "self serving" and that de Man "exalts evasiveness into a philosophical idea" in order to give himself a theory-based reason to remain silent.[84] These two scholars come to drastically opposing views of de Man even though they are reading the same article, which suggests that de Man's view is correct. All writing, even academic criticism is imbued with elements of the personal that obscure authentic unbiased research. Therefore, the supposed neutral evaluation made possible by academic criticism fails to account for its own biases and delegitimates itself as an evaluative medium. So, by introducing more of de Man's own logic, Kaplan has taken more credibility away from scholars that critique de Man.

Kaplan's final attempt to validate de Man's argument against confessing, and therefore to excuse his years of silence, uses de Man's only recorded confession acknowledging his fascist past.[85] Harvard received a letter denouncing de Man while de Man was a junior fellow there, and de Man responded in a letter explaining his actions. In this letter he refers to Henri de Man

[83] Ibid., 35.
[84] Ibid., 35.
[85] Ibid., 32.

(the uncle who helped him get a job at *Le Soir)* as his father. Kaplan notes that this small lie is a "Rousseau-like move" as it is "painting things as worse than they were...also painting things better than they were": worse because Henri was only de Man's uncle, but better because de Man's position is "more understandable" if de Man's own father urged him to get the job.[86] De Man has, again ironically, proved his own theory on confession. His father-uncle was the excuse that negated any true admission of wrongdoing. This private confession reveals the ridiculousness that would have ensued from a public confession, if we believe de Man's theory holds true in every circumstance. In this way, Kaplan's inclusion of what appears like damning evidence indicating de Man, actually works in de Man's favor, as de Man's own failed confession proves his idea that confession is doomed for failure and is thus better avoided.

At the end of her article, Kaplan returns to de Man's thoughts on autobiography and the de Man scandal in order to place them into a context that accounts for the nearly ten years of "retrospective judgment" scholars now possess; however, Kaplan's words are slippery at best and they fail to reach a conclusion. Kaplan acknowledges the irony involved in de Manian defenders rereading de Man's work for clues about his personal life, granting them, and herself, a bit of leeway by adding that: "It's so tempting you can't help but do it."[87] She calls this affair a "symptomatic moment" in the "sea change in American criticism," adding that the scandal does not "explain the change."[88] This would be an apt conclusion if she were studying how literary movements change; however, in this context calling the de Man affair a mere symptom diminishes its importance. Symptoms are studied only for how they relate to their larger issues; she is suggesting that the de Man affair does not deserve to be studied in its own right. Then,

[86] Ibid., 32.
[87] Ibid., 36.
[88] Ibid., 36.

after praising the "argumentative quality" of de Man's articles on autobiography, Kaplan laments, "I wish de Man had been open about his past life, although I suspect it would have been his undoing."[89] She appears to sympathize with de Man's secrecy, and she seems forgiving when she states that "where others judging him, see an open and shut case of fraudulence and hypocrisy, I still believe that he wanted to make a new life for himself, as removed as possible from the political disaster of his youth."[90] Kaplan claims to know de Man's intentions despite her earlier insistence on the indiscernibility of these intentions.[91]

Kaplan ends by posing yet another question to her audience: "Did the weight of de Man's secret give his articles on autobiography their particular energy and inform their paradoxical structure, their emphasis on failure?"[92] The immediate context of the question is the Derrida vs. Lehman debate - was de Man's analysis of Rousseau the result of close reading, backed by deconstructive theory, or was it a self-serving attempt to philosophize his way out of guilt? The larger context of this question is one many defenders of deconstruction face: did de Man's past actions influence his later work? For if the answer is yes, then de Manians must face the possibility that their theoretical insistence on the impersonal was a doctrine of distortion, serving its own author. Instead of answering this question, Kaplan quotes one of de Man's favorite lines of poetry: "How can we know the dancer from the dance?"[93] This is a perfect example of her now expected dodgy conclusion. She chose a line that de Man loves because of its double meaning. Yeats could be implying that there is no way to know the dancer from the dance, or he could be genuinely asking the reader how he is supposed to be able to distinguish

[89] Ibid., 36-37.
[90] Ibid., 37.
[91] Ibid., 37.
[92] Ibid., 37.
[93] Ibid., 37.

the dancer from the dance. Similarly, Kaplan could be implying that there is no way to know if de Man's past influenced his later work, thereby suggesting that further study would be useless, or Kaplan could be inviting the reader to figure out how we could begin to separate the influences of de Man's past life and his later criticism, essentially introducing further studies that could follow this article. Either way, she fails to give us an answer.

Part of Kaplan's motivation for writing another essay on de Man may have stemmed from a belief that her first essay was inadequate. In her memoir she admits that in her first article she "didn't take sides, [she] didn't want to condemn or moralize, merely to describe."[94] Earlier I analyze Kaplan's rhetoric to show the way in which her descriptions culminated in taking a "side"; however, she believes she was neutral, and this upsets her. Kaplan even recalls a letter from a peer who cut through Kaplan's de Manian flourish at the end of the article and "wanted to know the answer...what part that job at the newspaper played in making de Man, the cool ironic theorist of language from whom we had tried to learn."[95]

She seems upset with herself for reproducing such "dry analysis" and "emotional deadpan," but she also appears to still be holding a grudge against de Man.[96] Kaplan uses the phrase "from whom we had tried to learn," in order to ensure that the blame is not placed on the students for this failure to learn. Instead, the blame lies with de Man for his failure to teach. It seems that after teaching for some years and directing her own Ph.D. candidates, Kaplan realized that de Man had been an inadequate teacher. He was "impossible to please...de Man didn't even

[94] Kaplan, *French Lessons,* 169.
[95] Ibid., 169-170.
[96] Ibid., 170.

believe in pedagogy!"[97] She recounts numerous instances of de Man neglecting the needs of his students: times where she felt like an "eager dog," "needy and vulnerable" to his rare words of praise, students who abandoned their Ph.D. programs because of his lack of guidance, and the absence of a helpful conversation he could have held with Kaplan about her dissertation (a dissertation which dealt with his fascist peers).[98] Most convincingly, Kaplan claims that she does not want to follow in de Man's footsteps; she does not want to "fail [her students] the way that de Man failed [her]."[99] She seems upset with herself for failing to recognize de Man's flaws, and simultaneously she seems retroactively angry at de Man for being a flawed teacher.

These unresolved tensions with de Man do not seem to affect her enthusiasm for deconstruction. Despite her qualms regarding de Man, she remains a steadfast supporter of deconstruction: "Deconstruction was good for us...we were carriers of a new way of reading: the most advanced, thorough-going, questioning reading that had ever been done on a text. Everything that had come since in literature — the smorgasbord of disciplines and methods that passes as "interdisciplinary work" the debate on the canon with its sad obsession with limited resources and turf — all seems unworthy by comparison."[100] She heralds deconstruction right after her explanation of the de Man affair and the subsequent student backlash against the discipline. Her tone towards the new wave of disciplines is dismissive, which raises a question: what does she think of her students who are embracing this trend? Though she does explain some of deconstruction's drawbacks, acknowledging that it "constrained our imagination" and that she "suffered" because she "thought there was only one way to be rigorous," this statement still

[97] Ibid., 148.
[98] Ibid., 152, 174.
[99] Ibid., 174.
[100] Ibid., 172.

maintains that deconstruction is a rigorous and valid method of reading.[101] Even her personal revelation that de Man was imperfect does not cause her loyalty towards deconstruction to waiver.

Despite her frustration with de Man, Kaplan's memoir hints at a continued desire to please her former teacher, and even to fully embrace the unique structure of his articles, as if becoming the perfect student can somehow counteract his imperfections as a teacher. When describing the de Man affair and the subsequent scholarship it generated, Kaplan reiterates the feud between critics of deconstruction and her Yale peers. Then, in an attempt at securing academic justice for herself, Kaplan says, in reference to her first article, "I was going to get that long overdue "Honors" for originality."[102] "Honors" was a coveted grade that de Man awarded to papers that contained original ideas. After all of her lamenting about de Man's poor teaching technique, she returns to his grading scale as a way to distinguish herself among her peers. She still roots her definition of success in winning de Man's approval. Of course, she admits that this first article failed her own expectations, and so, perhaps this second article on de Man is another attempt at that "Honors" mark. In fact, examining the first half of the article reveals structural similarities to a de Man piece. It presents like a work of "disinterested close analysis," revisiting de Man and his thoughts on autobiography. De Man would begin his papers by "show[ing] how much he knew, casually."[103] Kaplan "casually" covers de Man's personal and academic history, adding a few playful phrases about his "thorny past" to show how comfortable she is with the material. Next, came the passage of the text, for Kaplan this is a retelling of both the original Rousseau confession and de Man's reading of it. Then de Man would "zero in on the blind

[101] Ibid., 172.
[102] Ibid., 168.
[103] Ibid., 155.

spot."[104] And here is where Kaplan's attempt at de Manian perfection breaks down into her own confession.

The second half of the article effectively functions as Kaplan's confession to de Man. There are a few reasons that Kaplan feels the desire to offer de Man an apology. It appears that she regrets her first article. She is convinced that she was too neutral (when perhaps she meant to offer more of a defense of de Man!). In her memoir she remembers a woman who called her from Yale and said "that she admired the cool of [Kaplan's] article but she could tell that [Kaplan] hadn't really loved him."[105] This story, a stand-alone paragraph, is not followed or preceded by Kaplan's thoughts on this exchange, but we can conjecture that she might regret appearing as if she did not care about him. Whether she is defending him or upset with him, the number of times she returns to de Man in her academic writing indicates his importance to her.

In fact, her second article attempts to dampen the harshness of some of the claims she made in her memoir. In her memoir Kaplan boldly states that de Man's interest was autobiography and that "the root of de Man's intellectual questions was in his own experience and pain."[106] This conclusion answers her friend's question about her first article: "what part that job at the newspaper played in making de Man, the cool ironic theorist of language."[107] Kaplan is saying that de Man's fascist past practically dictated his future interest in autobiography and deconstruction. However, such a strong conclusion feels strange coming from Kaplan, especially after reading her second article where she fails to draw this conclusion despite repeatedly posing the question. Why did her second, later article regress to merely asking questions that were veiled in "flourishes" and poetry at the end of her paper? Kaplan perhaps felt that her

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[104] Ibid., 155.
[105] Ibid., 170.
[106] Ibid., 173.
[107] Ibid., 169-170.

autobiography was too hard on de Man, so in her later writing she tried to smooth over some of her stronger statements by introducing those statements as questions, thus diminishing their power.

In this second article she not only apologizes for earlier statements she made, she also apologizes on behalf of her peers for the entire frenzied response to the de Man scandal. Kaplan's portrayal of the response makes it seem like a witch hunt where "virtually anyone who had ever competed with de Man, who had ever resented his success, came out of the woodwork."[108] She describes the intensive work de Man's students put into saving his reputation as "more like an exercise in detective fiction than criticism," as if she were speaking to de Man and admitting that they were naive to try and read his criticism autobiographically.[109]

The climactic moment in her confession is what earlier felt like a strange interruption or break in logic: "His article, whatever his intentions, is inexcusable."[110] Now, we can see that this interruption is her version of an anacoluthon. Rhetorically and ethically this statement breaks the logical flow of the rest of the essay which seems to defend de Man. Her paper is not centered on the article she is condemning; it is supposed to focus on autobiography, after all. However, rhetorically speaking, this interruption fits perfectly with the rest of her confession. Like Rousseau, she names as her excuse the object of her problem. Rousseau's goal was to use the ribbon to gain the favor of the woman he desired. When questioned, he names the object of the metaphor — the girl — because rhetorically his mind leaped there when thinking about the

[108] Kaplan, "Paul de Man and Auto-biography", 33.
[109] Ibid., 36.
[110] Ibid., 32.

ribbon. Likewise, Kaplan's goal is to gain de Man' approval. Kaplan condemns the *Le Soir* article because the *Le Soir* article is the object of this greater deconstructive debate that tore her apart from her teacher. That *Le Soir* article represents the scandal; rhetorically, Kaplan names the object of her greater frustration instead of naming the actual problem. In this sense, when Kaplan condemns *Le Soir* she is actually attempting to condemn this deeper scandal that caused the rift in her relationship with de Man. Kaplan then tries to salvage her relationship with de Man by separating de Man into a theorist and an author. She jokingly describes de Man as a "theorist who returned as an author."[111] Is it moral or even possible for her to seek the approval of the theorist-teacher she knew, and ignore the new fascist author character? This distinction reframes her last "flourish": How can we know the dancer from the dance? Is she now testifying that there is no way to distinguish one de Man from the other, and therefore her quest for approval is doomed, or is she asking optimistically how she can tell the two de Man's apart?

[111] Ibid., 36.

Chapter Three

The Proxy Trial: Condemning the Wrong Man

"The power conferred by talent and wit can be misused"[112]

On January 19, 1945, the trial of Robert Brasillach began. France was still at war, though Paris was liberated. An interim government, only four months in the making, had charged the young Brasillach, thirty-five at the time, with treason. The crime carried the death sentence. The trial opened to a packed audience with a number of famous journalists in the stands.
France was at a turning point, transitioning from Nazi occupation to De Gaulle's democracy. The Brasillach case marked the country's shift from occupied collaborators to independent resistance fighters. The nation was eager to condemn its recent past and Brasillach was its chosen victim.

Kaplan had studied Brasillach before, nearly fifteen years prior, in her 1986 publication of her dissertation, *Reproductions of Banality: Fascism Literature, and French Intellectual Life*.[113] In her dissertation, Kaplan analyzes the joint writings of Brasillach and his brother-in-law Maurice Bardeche in her penultimate chapter. This chapter of Kaplan's dissertation focuses primarily on Brasillach's interest and analysis of film, making only one brief mention of Brasillach's fate. Kaplan's discussion is centered on dissecting Brasillach's particular brand of fascism which she concludes is one based on unity and is therefore rather totalitarian in nature. After years of other scholarship, Kaplan returns to this fascist character in her 2000 publication, *The Collaborator*, a book primarily concerned with Brasillach's trial and death. This chapter of

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[112] Alice Kaplan, *The Collaborator: The Trial and Execution of Robert Brasillach*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), xv.
[113] Alice Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

my thesis will examine her latest work on Brasillach and her motives for returning to this author after her analyses of Paul de Man.

Born in the early 1900s, Brasillach was too young to fight in the First World War, though his father fought and died in the war. As a young scholar Brasillach studied at Louis-le Grand, where he met his best friend and future brother-in-law Maurice Bardeche. Bardeche and Brasillach became enchanted with one of their teachers, André Bellessort, a "passionate intellectual in the tradition of Charles Maurras" who introduced the boys to right-wing royalism.[114] After two years at Louis-le-Grand, Bardeche and Brasillach both moved to the Ecole Normale Superieure. His father's death had earned Brasillach a scholarship to study at the elite school in Paris — the "training ground for France's best students in literature, philosophy and science."[115] His teachers noted Brasillach's potential as a literary critic, and, indeed, Brasillach went on to publish a number of books of criticism. Brasillach's real love, however, was for cultural and political criticism, as he spent the majority of his career writing articles for newspapers on current movies, books, and trends. By the end of his college experience, Brasillach was quickly becoming a central figure in Paris's burgeoning community of young conservative thinkers. While most students were studying for *agregation*, an intensive final examination that guarantees admission into the French intellectual elite upon completion, Brasillach was busy writing mock obituaries for writers that were still very much alive. Brasillach gravitated toward this type of sarcastic commentary, and at the age of twenty-one he began his career as a columnist at *Action Française*, a right-wing newspaper. He was quickly picked up as a columnist by a second extreme right-wing paper *Je Suis Partout*. In 1931 he was

[114] Alice Kaplan, *The Collaborator: The Trial and Execution of Robert Brasillach,* 3.
[115]Ibid., 3.

"put in charge of the literary page for the *Action Française* newspaper."[116] He was the "youngest critic ever to write for that paper."[117]

Bardeche, in the meantime, had passed his *agregation* and was beginning what would become a long career as a professor. Brasillach took the *agregation* twice and failed both times. In 1932 he decided to fully devote himself to his criticism and his novels, the first of which had just been published. Kaplan observes that "between 1932 and 1939, Brasillach distanced himself from the classic *Action Française* line and moved squarely into the other camp of French fascism at *Je Suis Partout.*"[118] However, Kaplan says that there was nothing natural or "automatic" about such an "evolution."[119] Kaplan credits the events of February 6, 1934 with influencing Brasillach's political ideology. On February 6, 1934 there was a protest march down the Champs-Élysées where nationalist groups, who were angry about the corruption of their government, fought the Republican guards right outside the Chamber of Deputies.[120] Kaplan notes the immediate casualties: "Fifteen rioters died, 1,500 people were wounded, and the left-leaning government in power immediately resigned."[121]

Brasillach, of course, was not actually in the streets fighting, but at the theater. These events "became much more important for him retrospectively than in the moment. It came to represent the dashed hope of a Fascist takeover of France — the fantasized equivalent of Hitler's beer hall putsch of 1923."[122] Brasillach returned to the site of the revolt each year bearing flowers. This small nationalist spectacle "furnished the extreme right with a spectacle and

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[116] Ibid., 11.
[117] Ibid., 11.
[118] Ibid., 11.
[119] Ibid., 11.
[120] Ibid., 12.
[121] Ibid., 12.
[122] Ibid., 12.

narrative of revolt...henceforth two camps were in place: there were fascists and anti-fascists in France."[123] Brasillach began to write less for the more traditionally conservative *Action Française,* and more for the extremist *Je Suis Partout.* The war began, first in Poland in 1939, and Brasillach's love for fascism grew as the war progressed. He continued to write increasingly anti-Semitic articles in *Je Suis Partout,* as well as publishing a few novels and a play centered on fascist ideals. His wartime articles were considered dangerous insofar as they revealed the names of both Jews and resistance fighters hiding in Paris and the surrounding suburbs. In fact, a friend Kaplan meets in France tells Kaplan that Brasillach was "responsible for the assassination of Hélène's father."[124] Hélène, the friend's wife, was born Hélène Zay, and her father was Jean Zay, the Minister of National Education and Fine Arts in the mid-1930s. Jean Zay was imprisoned by the Vichy government under charges of desertion.[125] In 1944 he was taken out of jail by a fascist group of thugs who called themselves the "Milice".[126] This fascist gang responded to Brasillach's call for Jean Zay's death. Brasillach had no problem compromising the lives of his fellow Frenchmen to support the new fascist state. Brasillach, though originally a literary critic, was undeniably also a collaborator.

Brasillach's trial begin when France was still three months short of a complete victory. Brasillach was tried for treason, under Article 75, like many before and after him; however he

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[123] Ibid., 12.
[124] Alice Kaplan, *French Lessons: A Memoir*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 188.
[125] Jean Zay resigned from his position as the Minister of National Education and Fine Arts in 1939. He served as a second lieutenant in the French army at the beginning of the war. In the summer of 1940 he attempted to escape to Morocco to establish a resistance government. Unfortunately, he was quickly captured by the Vichy government. He stayed in prison until his untimely death. All biographic information pertaining to Jean Zay came from Benjamin Ivry, "What He Contributed, What He Endured" (*The Forward*, 2011) and Antoine Prost, "Jean Zay at the Pantheon" (*CNRS Le Journal,* 2014).
[126] Kaplan, *French Lessons*, 188.

was the "only writer of any distinction put to death during the Purge."[127] When Brasillach was tried the Germans were still in Alsace-Lorraine; in fact, a month prior the Germans had launched a nearly successful offensive in Alsace-Lorraine with the aim of recapturing Paris.[128] According to Kaplan, Paris was both excited and anxious as "the liberated city wondered if its celebrations hadn't been premature."[129] Brasillach was executed at the height of this fervor; "a year later, the saying goes, he would certainly have drawn a lesser charge."[130] For these reasons, Brasillach's trial has been considered more of a spectacle than a legitimate arbitration of justice, as it seems France needed a scapegoat to bear the burden of the many instances of collaboration by many other Frenchmen. Brasillach, the popular right-wing writer whose words directly hurt people, was the perfect choice. His writing was damning enough to be dangerous. He was arraigned at the court on charges of treason, and after a short 6-hour trial, with 20 minutes of deliberation from the jury, he was shot by a firing squad.

Alice Kaplan dissects both this trial and its characters in *The Collaborator: The Trial and Execution of Robert Brasillach*, a book published in 2000. In this "rare scholarly page-turner" Kaplan examines the trial from multiple perspectives.[131] She considers the prosecutor's, defense attorney's and jury's view of the lead up and playout of the trial. Her well-researched book chronicles Brasillach's last days and the formation and effects of the mythology surrounding him. Her book was generally well received; in fact, the University of Chicago's book review said that *The Collaborator* "will stand as the definitive account of Brasillach's crime and

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[127] Kaplan, *The Collaborator*, ix.
[128] Ibid., 143.
[129] Ibid., 143.
[130] Ibid., xi.
[131] "The Collaborator: The Trial and Execution of Robert Brasillach by Alice Kaplan", Publisher Weekly Reviews, (Reviewed on April 17th, 2000).

punishment."[132] It seems Kaplan's misstep, according to reviewers, was that she did not seem to present new historical information, and that her presentation of the trial was too focused on Brasillach's guilt. Ralph Schoolcraft notes that "despite good intentions on her part, Kaplan ultimately uncovers scant new historical information. Brasillach's rejected pardon file is made available for the first time, but Kaplan runs into dead ends in her quest to reconstruct the identity, and thought processes of the jurors."[133] The *Kirkus Book Review*, though overwhelmingly positive, did say that Kaplan's book "makes clear beyond all doubt Brasillach's role in inducing others to send innocents to their graves."[134] Moreover, Rei Terada's review observes how "Kaplan prefers keeping Brasillach public and small, contextualized to the point of miniaturization….Apparently Kaplan does not want to humanize Brasillach with psychological detail or participate in his glamorization by allowing herself to react to his crises or wisecracks."[135] To me, it seems that Kaplan does not just reexamine an old case in light of new historical findings, she retries a dead man and re-condemns him.

David Bell, a history professor at Johns Hopkins writing for the *New York Times*, claims that in Kaplan's book, "Brasillach sat not at the lunch table, but in the dock, as Kaplan tells the story of his trial and execution."[136] Bell goes on to add that "oddly for a critic, trained in probing beneath the surface of texts (by Paul de Man, no less!), Kaplan takes the trial itself very much at

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[132] "The Collaborator: The Trial and Execution of Robert Brasillach by Alice Kaplan", The University of Chicago Press Books, (Reviewed in 2000).
[133] Ralph Schoolcraft, "The Collaborator: The Trial and Execution of Robert Brasillsch" (*L'Esprit Créateur* vol.2 no.1, 2002), 137.
[134] "The Collaborator: The Trial and Execution of Robert Brasillach", Kirkus Book Review, (Reviewed on March 15, 2000).
[135] Rei Terada, "A Review of Alice Kaplan, The Collaborator: The Trial and Execution of Robert Brasillach", (*Other Voices,* vol.2 no.2, 2000).
[136] David A. Bell, "Poison Pen: A Study of a French Writer who was executed for his support of the Nazis in WW II" (*The New York Times,* April 30th, 2000).

face value."[137] Why would Kaplan, after years of training in the deconstructive methods, accept the legitimacy of a wartime trial? Moreover, why would she feel the need to retry a long dead man? Again, we can turn to Kaplan's relationship to Paul de Man for answers. As I show in this chapter, the similarities between de Man and Brasillach are uncanny, and even their differences suggest that they were part of the same intellectual cadre. Kaplan puts Brasillach on trial instead of de Man because Brasillach, the dead man, is easier to condemn. Brasillach, besides being a far more conspicuous fascist collaborator, had no connection to Kaplan, as he was executed long before she was born. Without the burden of a personal relationship, Kaplan can condemn Brasillach for his fascist crimes in a way that she is unable to condemn de Man. For Kaplan, like for France, Brasillach's execution is symbolic.

Brasillach and de Man were so similar that Kaplan's conclusions about Brasillach transfer naturally to de Man, and often seem more aptly applied to de Man. The main difference between Brasillach and de Man was the timeline of their careers when mapped over the timeline of the war. Brasillach was a literary critic first, and this literary background influenced his fascism which developed during the 1930s, culminating in a short-lived career as one of the foremost French collaborationist columnists. He was seen as the so-called "cultural spokesperson for a French fascism" before his execution in 1945.[138] Brasillach's fascism was "founded on esthetics and on racism."[139] Coming from a background of literary criticism and novel writing, Brasillach "relied on the reference points and vocabulary of the literary critic - images, poetry,

[137] Bell, "Poison Pen" (*New York Times).*
[138] Alice Kaplan, *The Collaborator: The Trial and Execution of Robert Brasillach,* 12.
[139] Ibid., 13.

myths - with barely a reference to politics, economics, or ethics."[140] His training was that of an elite literary critic, and such a style greatly affected his work as a columnist. Moreover, his rebellious nature coupled with his already established career meant that he would not, and did not have to, follow the newspapers' old party line. He "wrote whatever he felt like. His articles were self-assured, cheeky, and memorable."[141] Brasillach was known for his clever and often biting insults.

De Man was younger than Brasillach, and had no career to speak of before he began writing for Nazi-controlled newspapers. De Man's writing was therefore more susceptible to the "clichés of fascist nationalism," according to Kaplan. Yet, in his writing one could already see what Kaplan understands as his budding genius in the "way he argues his position, the logic he brings to bear."[142] Because he never reached a level of prominence even close to that of Brasillach, de Man was able to escape prosecution by the government after the war. It was not until a Belgian graduate student discovered his political writings nearly fifty years later that the charges of fascism came to light. Whereas Brasillach used his early training as literary critic to influence his political writings, de Man's literary criticism evolved out of this early career as a columnist. De Man acted as a spokesperson for the theory of deconstruction in the 1970's and 1980's in the same way that Brasillach represented French fascism back in the 1930s. However, unlike Brasillach, de Man did not face his own set of charges until after his death. Absent of the ability to defend himself, his reputation rested on his students and peers. Kaplan, caught in this emotional trap, found herself defending a collaborator comparable to Brasillach. As the previous

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[140] Ibid., 13.
[141] Ibid., 11.
[142] Alice Kaplan, "Paul de Man, Le Soir, and the Francophone Collaborators (1940-1942)" in *Responses: On Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 268.

chapters discuss, she was unable to acknowledge that de Man was as culpable as the fascists she detailed and analyzed in her dissertation. According to Kaplan, Brasillach, on the other hand, was "a sparkling, feared critic, a controversial political pundit, and a cultural celebrity of the extreme right."[143] Brasillach embodies the spirit of de Man — a rebellious youth with a sharp tongue meets a brilliant critic with a unique gift for arguing. Brasillach is what de Man would have become during the war if de Man had been old enough to establish himself in the pre-war academic environment. Brasillach, a man condemned by unlucky timing, bears the brunt of Kaplan's anger with de Man.

Early in *The Collaborator,* Kaplan poses a question that serves as her research question for the entire book: "Brasillach was executed by the Liberation government, and he remained in the public mind, the symbol of the collaborator for generations to come. How did Robert Brasillach, a writer, come to play that singular and shameful role?"[144] This may be aptly applied to de Man, who took over Brasillach's role as the "symbolic collaborator" after his own scandal broke in 1987. Kaplan's articles on de Man, and even her memoir, aimed at expanding that singular role for de Man. In her memoir she shows us de Man the teacher; in her first article we see de Man the budding critical genius, and in her last article we see de Man the troubled, apologetic, and accomplished literary critic, too bound by his own theories to honestly address his problems. However, she does not illustrate Brasillach's other potential identities; on the contrary, Kaplan reinforces the symbol of Brasillach as a collaborator throughout the text, giving the book the "surface level" argumentations that the reviewers acknowledge.

[143] Kaplan, *The Collaborator*, 17.
[144] Ibid., 1.

In addition to their similarities as writers, these two authors share the same ability to embrace contradictory versions of themselves. As a critic, Brasillach "mocked the kind of whimpering sentiment he himself indulged in his own fiction."[145] De Man, in the same way, would endorse a theory that disapproved of the polemical, politically charged, and often intimate writing de Man engaged in as a columnist in the 1940s. Kaplan claims that for Brasillach this disapproval was not "a double personality, but a personality where one half — the critic — disapproves of the other half — the writer."[146] Kaplan makes a similar claim in her first article on de Man, where she argues that "de Man's theoretical career was motivated, to an extent we can't measure, by a need to isolate himself from the kind of political choices European intellectuals were forced to make between 1940 and 1945, and that de Man most likely believed he had made badly."[147] As a literary critic, de Man used his theory to rhetorically demolish his own earlier career. Like Brasillach, de Man's critical eye was perceptive enough to realize the mistakes that he made as a writer and to chastise other writers for embedding political ideals in their writing. However, neither Brasillach or de Man ever openly acknowledged those mistakes in their own writing.

Despite these similarities, Kaplan's treatments of the two men are drastically different. In her first article on de Man, Kaplan argues that wartime context mitigates de Man's culpability. Kaplan paints a bleak picture of occupied Belgium: "Brussels lived in fear of British bombing raids. There were strafing planes on Belgian roads, bomb, shell splinters; the Germans advised people to line their floor with sandbags, they fired shots into houses whose windows weren't covered in black paper shades, then fined their occupants."[148] After painting a sympathetic

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[145] Ibid., 18.
[146] Ibid., 18.
[147] Kaplan, "Paul de Man, Le Soir, and the Francophone Collaborators", 278.
[148] Ibid., 267.

illustration of this war torn city, Kaplan begins discussing de Man, claiming that she "can't insist enough on the problem of perspective that is inevitable in reading de Man's wartime writing."[149] Though this quotation was considered at length in an earlier chapter, it is worth remembering that this argument attempts to exonerate de Man by using his historical setting as a kind of exonerating alibi. Because conditions were horrible, it was okay to engage in immoral activities. Kaplan does not offer a similar defense for Brasillach.

In Brasillach's case, Kaplan recalls French statistics for the deportations of Jews: "76,000 Jews were deported from France during Occupation, mostly foreign Jews who had sought refuge there in the early 1930s. Of these, fewer than 3,000 returned. 65,000 others were arrested and sent to camps as hostages, as common-law prisoners, or for their actions in the resistance."[150] Kaplan again provides important historical context, only here the bleak picture is not of a particular city, but of a particular people. The sobering numbers provoke an emotional response from any reader who realizes what happened to those Jews who did not return. Kaplan builds on this dark image of France by adding that: "[i]n such a heightened and treacherous atmosphere, all aspects of daily life were politicized. The written word had a new status, a new power to do evil and good."[151] In Brasillach's case, Kaplan argues that in the context of war, writers were all the more responsible for their actions. In such a "treacherous atmosphere," it is no longer permissible to produce work that encouraged more treachery. On the contrary, the written word has more power that it does in more ordinary times; therefore, writers have an obligation to ensure that their words are serving moral causes. This respect for the power of the writer in extreme times differs from her assessment of the same idea when writing about de Man.

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[149] Ibid., 267.
[150] Kaplan, The Collaborator, 32.
[151] Ibid., 33.

Brasillach was not just denied a mitigating factor by this discussion of context; he was condemned even further as he failed to fulfill his obligations as a wartime writer. Brasillach is chastised for his failures while de Man is exonerated for his.

Kaplan uses Brasillach to replace de Man in her own trial because Brasillach is easier to condemn, as he was more directly involved in treasonous activities. Judging writers can be especially challenging for Americans, given the expectation of freedom of speech. The line between free speech and speech that incites violence is blurry. De Man's speech, while it was anti-Semitic and pro-Nazi, cannot be directly traced to any hate crimes or arrests. While his speech is morally condemnable, it floats in legally murky waters. Brasillach's writing, on the other hand, is more obviously criminal. Brasillach published the names of Jews and resistance fighters who were trying to hide from the government and the names of Jews who were attempting to maintain their businesses under pseudonyms. His denunciations led to the death of Jean Zay and other Frenchmen. His words can be thought of as murderous in a way that de Man's cannot. Brasillach's writing is more clearly violent than de Man's. While she was not able to condemn de Man, even in the court of popular opinion, Kaplan is able to condemn Brasillach in the trial that aims at resurrecting France's crippled ego after the war.

De Man and Brasillach had different charges brought against them. Brasillach was charged with treason; the homosexual undertones in his writing convinced the jury that he was guilty of having a love affair with Germany. De Man was charged with bigotry. His infamous anti-Semitic article incited the scandal and destroyed his reputation. Marcel Reboul, the lead prosecutor, essentially won the Brasillach case when he quoted a piece Brasillach wrote just six months before Paris was liberated. Brasillach wrote: "whether we like it or not, we will have lived together. Frenchmen, given to reflection, during these years, will have more or less slept

with Germany."[152] Though Brasillach presumably meant this liaison was symbolic, Reboul succeeded in convincing the jury that Brasillach was a "horizontal collaborator." His "love for Germany was tantamount to an infidelity to France - and worse, a perverse infidelity. Brasillach was perverse, unproductive, and un-French."[153] Kaplan acknowledges that such an argument relies on people's fear of homosexuality. She knows that Reboul used "the hatred of homosexuality to reinforce the hatred of Brasillach", a move that we today would consider unfair.[154] So, Kaplan alters Brasillach's charges in order to fairly condemn him. She prosecutes him not for his homosexuality, but for his anti-Semitism, the same charge that de Man faced after his death. Kaplan spends the greater part of a chapter dissecting Brasillach's brand of anti-Semitism, focusing most of her attention on his most damning quote: "We must separate from the Jews en bloc and not keep any little ones."[155] She traces the origin of this quote, the effect it might have had on his readers, the effect he intended it to have, and its implications for his trial and our memory of him. She is disgusted by this statement, and his refusal to apologize for it. Though de Man's anti-Semitic statements were not as harsh, he too failed to apologize or even talk about them. Kaplan's insistence on judging Brasillach for his anti-Semitism comes from her inability to judge de Man for his.

[152] Ibid., 162.
[153] Ibid., 163.
[154] Ibid., 164.
[155] Ibid., 82.

Conclusion

The Jury Deliberates: Evaluating Deconstruction

"Maybe I could have it both ways — I could deconstruct fascism, and I could show that intellectuals were just as subject as anyone else to fascist longings."[156]

By toppling one of the pillars of deconstruction, the de Man scandal undermined the orthodoxy that held the critical literary world hostage. As Kaplan observes, this fracturing of the deconstructive world allowed for a wave of new interdisciplinary theories, all of which predicated their criticism on a careful analysis of context and the way context informs literature. Recognizing this irreversible addition of context, Kaplan tries to salvage deconstructive theory by experimentally wedding context to deconstruction in her assessment of her teacher Paul de Man. However, this marriage began with irreconcilable differences. In her first article on de Man, Kaplan avoids a clash between these two elements by refusing to simultaneously apply them. Kaplan ignores context when discussing de Man's writing style because she is using deconstructive techniques to analyze his arguments. She omits analysis of historical context and completely eludes any discussion of moral context when she examines the logical coherence of his anti-Semitic theories.

Later in her article, bowing to the imperative to acknowledge de Man's anti-Semitism in its historical context, Kaplan includes a brief recitation of the wartime civilian and intellectual environment. Unfortunately, Kaplan's preferred tool of analysis, deconstruction, famously lacks a mechanism for evaluating context. This is perhaps best crystallized in Jacques Derrida's pithy maxim, "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte" (there is nothing outside of the text or there is no outside-

[156] Alice Kaplan, *French Lessons: A Memoir* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 159.

text). In other words, historical context cannot be separated from the text itself (a philosophical point that de Man insists on in his writings on autobiography). Deconstructive criticism is predicated on the supposition that any text leaves traces of the logical and linguistic paradoxes on which they are constructed. Deconstruction, therefore, refuses to understand historical context as a stable referent; it remains just one more unstable element of a larger, unstable text. Therefore, Kaplan limits herself to merely describing the effects of occupation and the atmosphere of collaboration when she includes context in her argument. Because deconstruction cannot accept context as truth, Kaplan is unable to judge de Man's actions. Not only does she fail to weigh his actions in their historical context, she insists that this wartime context protects de Man from any form of evaluation — all because her own tool of analysis is unable to perform the task.

Kaplan embraces deconstruction's recognition that all texts display some bias from their authors and she employs this de Manian idea to excuse de Man's silence on his fascist past. While it is troubling that deconstructive theory allows for a defense of fascist actions, I found this element of deconstruction useful when writing my thesis. Examination of author bias and identification of the personal prejudices present in the academic are the bases of my research. Deconstructive theory encouraged me to be skeptical of the intention behind a text, stated or unstated, but its usefulness stopped there. I had to combine my initial skepticism of Kaplan's written words with research that situated those words into the context of her academic and personal career in order to form any reasonable conclusions. Deconstruction has its merits as a tool for rhetorical analysis, but it is not equipped to distinguish truth in an argument, as it is not a philosophy. Therefore, while deconstruction can be used to dissect arguments, it should not be used to perform moral evaluations. Rather, it is a rhetorical tool. Kaplan's logically coherent

arguments defending de Man illustrate deconstruction's ability as a rhetorical method, while simultaneously showing deconstruction's failure as a philosophy.

Absent from this thesis is a close examination of how Kaplan's Jewish identity influenced her articles on de Man and her research on fascism. Did she believe her Jewish identity would be used to undermine her objectivity were she to criticize de Man? Did Kaplan fear that her Jewishness could act like a political weapon, pigeonholing Kaplan into being a defender of de Man? Perhaps, she did not want to judge him because she would be accused of having a Jewish bias, but she knew she could defend him because she was one of the select group of people who would not be accused of anti-Semitism (only Nixon could go to China). Or was her defense of de Man more personal in that she did not want to imagine that de Man still believed in fascist ideals when he was teaching her? She viewed her relationship with him as that of a student to a teacher; perhaps she did not want to believe that de Man may have seen first the Jew, then the student.

I do not study how Kaplan's Jewish identity may have led her to the study of fascism or how that Jewishness interacts with her academic writing, partly because I lacked the evidence and academic model necessary to craft a legitimate intellectual discussion about her Jewishness. Kaplan could not write about how her Jewish identity affected her writing if she wanted to remain logically consistent with deconstructive theory. A deconstructive critic would not claim to know what bias they were operating in, or how that bias influenced their texts. For this reason, perhaps, Kaplan writes very little about her religious background, with only a few mentions of her Jewishness scattered throughout her memoir. Moreover, there is a problem of nested biases in the writing and reading of my thesis. I, as a Jewish student, am analyzing Kaplan, a Jewish professor, in her interactions with French fascists; in addition, my reader, a subject I cannot

know the context of, is analyzing my work on Kaplan. Deconstruction is helpful in that it recognizes these layers of bias and illuminates the multiplicity of readings occurring in every text. However, deconstruction does not offer a solution to the problem it presents. How can Kaplan or I realize the biases we are creating in our texts? How can you know the dancer from the dance?

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